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FROM BRAZZAVILLE EMBASSY OFFICE

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SUBJECT: CONGO/BRAZZAVILLE: JUNE EDITION,
"BRAZZA IN BRIEF" - THE HOMECOMING

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Classified By: CDC Mark J. Biedlingmaier, Reasons 1.4(B)(D)

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: ROC President Denis Sassou-Nguesso is expected to return to Brazzaville on June 13 following widely-publicized visits to New York for his June 2 address to the United Nations on HIV/AIDs, June 5 meeting in Washington with President Bush and Secretary Rice, and a brief visit with King Mohammed VI in Morocco to discuss possible membership in the African Union. Sassou postponed his return to Brazzaville by several days to visit his daughter, Edith, wife of Gabon President Omar Bongo, who had taken ill in Paris. Other Ministry observers noted that the side-trip might have been scheduled to reinvigorate talks with members of the Paris Club on debt relief issues following Sassou's meetings with World Bank and IMF officials during his Washington visit. The after-glow of Sassou's acclaimed "foreign policy triumphs", as reported by TeleCongo and other local media, may be short-lived as he tackles persistent domestic and economic issues on the homefront before heading off for the next round of travels to Banjul in late June for the African Union Summit, June 28 - July 2, as an invitee to the G-8 Meeting in St. Petersburg, Russia, July 14-17, and also recently announced, for a month-long vacation to Spain before returning to Congo to celebrate National Day in Dolisie on August 15. END
SUMMARY

NO GUTS, NO GAS

[1](#)2. (C) One of the most pressing items stacked in Mr. Sassou's inbox will be the Presidential Decree awaiting his signature to increase prices for gasoline and diesel fuel by 14% and 17%, respectively. The new price structure will be 495 F/CFA per liter for gasoline (USD \$0.97), 345 F/CFA per liter for diesel (USD \$0.68), and a split standard for aviation jet fuels, 290 F/CFA for domestic flights (USD \$0.57) and 400 F/CFA for international flights (USD \$0.78). Prior to his departure for Washington, IMF Resident Representative Yaya Moussa was roundly criticized by Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Hydrocarbon officials for "imposing" this new price structure as a precondition for HIPC debt relief and favorable passage of Decision Point earlier this year, but in private, one-on-one discussion with Sassou on May 28, Moussa reported that the President was fully aware that "actions,

rather than words," would now be expected from him and the Republic of Congo to satisfy its creditors and international partners.

Sassou clearly anticipated that transparency issues, audit and accounting practices for SNPC, and commitments to PRGF would dominate talks with Mr. Wolfowitz, the IMF and Secretary Rice. In anticipation of the price increases,

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hoarding of stocks and long gas lines have spread throughout downtown Brazzaville, much to the dismay of the average Congolese, who find it difficult to comprehend increasing prices in one of Africa's richest oil-producing regions. Everyone is resigned to the fact that, once the Presidential Decree is promulgated, prices will jump across the board for taxi and bus transport, domestic consumer goods and products imported to Pointe Noire and Brazzaville.

WE WANT TO BE HEARD?

13. (C) The month-long demonstration by 150-200 former and retired workers of ONPT-SOTELCO (National Post and Telecommunications Agency) ended abruptly with the appearance of several jack-boot, black-suited Presidential Guards to the rallying spot in downtown Brazzaville, located between the Central Post Office and French Embassy Compound. ONPT was among the first state-owned companies to be privatized by the government in 2000-2001, resulting in the early retirement or dismissal of approximately 1500 workers. The former workers claimed that a new, smaller successor company, SOTELCO, Congolese Telecommunication Company, should be responsible for the payment of severance packages and up to 86 months of unpaid salaries. Following protracted negotiations between the Council of Ministers and ONPT representatives, the government initially agreed to pay the salary arrears in

January 2006; however, employees received only one month's wages. After talks between the sides broke down in late March, a sit-in was announced for May unless a compromise could be reached with Minister of Telecommunication, Mr. Philippe Mvouo. The daily demonstrations attracted an expressive group of activists intent on disrupting the solitude of the downtown business district by chanting protest slogans, clanging pots, pans and other metal objects, and occasionally disrupting traffic. No doubt hoping to restore peace and tranquility prior to Sassou's return this week, the fully-armed and imposing Presidential Guard members appeared at the site on June 9 and effectively impeded the right to assemble. No resistance was displayed; no force used.

AFRICA-STYLE DEMOCRACY

14. (C) Ministers from across Africa met in Brazzaville, June 8-11, to approve a draft "Charter on Democracy," a follow-on document to the Lome Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Governments in Africa, which would set guidelines on elections and good governance, and will be put forward for ratification at the African Union's Head of State Meeting in the Gambia, July 1-2. A participant in the conference, South Africa Embassy DCM Coen vanWyk, reported on a dizzying series of discussions held throughout the weekend which centered on how "African democracy" differed from that of other nations, and that if a system worked for them, there might be a reason not/not to change the status quo. He said the assembly was dumb-struck by comments offered by Prime Minister Isidore Mvoubi urging caution at the onset of the ministerial. In his remarks, Mvoubi stated that "Africans must avoid mere imitation and propose texts adapted to African states, texts that contribute to the installation of peaceful democracy across the continent." The ministers eventually reached agreement on the 55-article draft charter which explicitly condemns coup d'etats, criticizes corruption, and commits governments to promoting a free press, citizens'

participation in democracy and transparency in government. The document also prohibits the practice of "modifying" a nation's constitution in order to extend a president's mandate in office. By coincidence, the "Charter of Democracy" ministerial took place just days after Nigerian President Obansajo dismissed six members of his Cabinet for having supported an amendment in Parliament to reject a plan which would have allowed him to seek a third term in 2007.

A HOUSE DIVIDED

¶5. (C) Rumors persist amongst members of the Diplomatic Corps, ministry insiders and opposition newspapers on an "impending shake-up" in the Sassou-Nguesso Cabinet. Likely candidates for early retirement still include: Minister of Health, Dr. Alphonse Gando; Minister of Finance, Pacifique Issiobeka; Minister of Transportation, Andre Okombi Salissa; and talk of combining the three separate ministries of Education under the guidance of Madame Rosalie Kama, currently, Minister of Primary and Secondary Education and Literacy. The strongest resistance would most likely come from Minister Okombi-Salissa, a close confidant of the President's daughter, Edith Bongo, and, in control of a private militia which, in the past, has apparently resorted to physical threats and harassment to silence critics opposed to his private, less-than-transparent, business dealings. The Pool region remains quiet and will be lavished with attention during this year's Congo National Day, August 15, when the President is expected to showcase a host of renovation and successful infrastructure projects in Dolisie to government officials and invited guests, including the Diplomatic Corps, for the annual celebration. Embassy Brazzaville is working closely with a Belgian entrepreneur, Rodolphe Andersen, under contract by the Government of Congo to rehabilitate the once state-of-the-art Dolisie Hospital, to provide funding through a DoD Humanitarian Assistance Grant to medical equipment and supplies.

¶6. (C) Post has received no further updates on the negotiations underway with former President Pascal Lissouba, in exile in Paris, on an amnesty agreement or terms and conditions for his return to Republic of Congo. Observers note that Sassou-Nguesso, the master strategist, could conceivably deliver him to an adoring crowd of Pool well-wishers at the Dolisie August 15th National Day event, thereby cementing his year-long campaign for peace and reconciliation. The 2007 legislative election will be just around the corner. The only issue which might offset Sassou's march toward stability is yet another rumor that the Speaker of Parliament may lead a walk-out on June 15 to protest the President's lack of governmental reforms and the ever-encroaching influence of his family members on business dealings in Congo and overseas.

¶7. (U) And yes, inauguration of the Savoran deBrazza mausoleum, and return of the famed explorer's remains, will finally take place in October 2006 to commemorate the 101st anniversary of the founding of Brazzaville. Reserve seating required.

¶8. (U) Embassy Brazzaville Office - Biedlingmaier

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